

COMMENTARY

THE LIBERALS' POLITICAL ROAD BACK

The Days of Reform From Above Are Over

ROBERT BENDINER

SPECULATION about the political future of American liberalism in the next few years realistically begins, if it does not end, with the outlook for the Democratic party. Any suggestion that the two are synonymous will be promptly and rightly repudiated by every professional liberal, every Tammany precinct captain, and every senatorial heir of Jefferson Davis, but, for all that, the prospects of both political forces are, at the very least, interdependent. On the one hand, either the party will continue in the imaginative tradition of Roosevelt, Truman, and Stevenson, colored and motivated by the liberal impulse, or it will relapse into political sterility. On the other

hand, American liberals have little choice, at least on the level of national politics, but to function as effectively as they can through the Democratic party.

For this mutual dependence, however impermanent it may be—and I am inclined to think it will be of long duration—the reasons are hardly obscure. Consider first the plight of the liberals. Unorthodox opinion in the United States—from Keynesian economics to socialism, from preoccupation with the Bill of Rights to municipal reform—has never been organizationally weaker than today. Reduced to a handful are the swarm of leagues, committees, associations, and congresses that clogged the mail in the 1920's and 1930's with their glittering letterheads, by no means all or even most of them "popular fronts." Gone is the Progressive party of the La Follettes. The Farmer-Labor party and the Non-Partisan League have long since lost themselves in the fold of the major parties. Wallace's Progressives and the American Labor party, both wrecked by Communists, are hollow shells, untouchable for any but the blindest fellow-travelers. And the Socialist party, which once gave Debs close to a million votes, gave its nominee all of 20,000 in 1952 and will not again appear on the ballot. For liberals who want independent political action the only going concern of consequence is Americans for Demo-

WHAT are the prospects of liberalism in the present era and under the present administration? What are the chances for a remobilization of the forces of social reform, which most observers agree are at the moment at low ebb? ROBERT BENDINER reports here on the state of mind of the liberals, and on program and strategy that he finds crystallizing in Washington, New York, and other centers of reformist politics; he writes as one who believes that the fate and achievements of liberalism have been perforce—and will in all likelihood remain—identified with the Democratic party. Mr. Bendiner is a free-lance writer, former associate editor of the *Nation*. His article "Just How Bad Is Congress?" appeared in our February 1952 issue.

cratic Action, and it is no secret that where that organization has been most effective—in Minnesota, in Connecticut, in Philadelphia—it has functioned close to, or wholly within, the Democratic party.

THE reasons for this organizational poverty on the left are not hard to discover. Twenty years of New Deal-Fair Deal government have sucked out much of the good these independent groups had to offer and have made that good into law. If the "Big Change" in American life since 1900 has not been quite as overwhelming and conclusive as Frederick Lewis Allen believes, it has nevertheless been large enough to take the steam out of reform, and the drive out of reformers. The yawning gulf between extremes of income has been significantly narrowed, and what is more important, the process of narrowing it still further, through powerful trade unions, the income tax, and other countervailing forces, has been recognized as a normal pattern for the nation. Moreover, not only did government buy many of the reformers' most appealing wares—public power, wage-hour laws, woman suffrage, social security, and so forth—but for twenty years it drained reform groups of their prime movers and personalities, absorbing them into the agencies that drew up and administered their reforms.

What government left intact in the way of these "ginger" groups, the Communists frequently infiltrated, corrupted, and ultimately destroyed. Increasingly, liberals who were unattracted, disenchanted, or altogether repelled by the Communists have come to lean on the party that, in spite of its Byrds, McCarrans, and O'Dwyers, promoted those social gains that have been made since the depression. And now, with that party in defeat, the liberals have only the choice of sticking with it and contributing to its regeneration, or of trying to set up independent groups at a moment when the cold war gravely inhibits new political organization and renders all novelty suspect.

At least some mention should be made of a theoretical third possibility, that of work-

ing within the Republican party. "Theoretical," however, is exactly the word, since that extremely small band of Republicans who have been identified with liberalism in any form have had not so much as a nod of encouragement from Mr. Eisenhower, before the inauguration or since. The heavy weighting of presidential appointments on the side of big industry; the bland acceptance of the offshore oil grab, logically regarded as a forerunner to widespread pilfering of the public domain; the lackadaisical quality of the administration, far more reminiscent of Calvin Coolidge than of Theodore Roosevelt—all have served to choke off the most naive hope that under Eisenhower the GOP would encourage a resurgence of the liberal spirit.

As for the reverse of the coin, the Democrats' dependence on liberalism, their party has historically achieved and retained power—war situations aside—when it had a progressive program to offer: a New Freedom, a New Deal, a Fair Deal. It loses when it offers only to hold the line, when it is content to defend its past achievement, and goes on chanting stale slogans. In such cases the Republicans have only to espouse the gains they themselves stubbornly fought while in the making. (Theodore Roosevelt was the exception who promised more than that, and even though he did not mean half of what he said, he nearly wrecked the Republican party.)

THUS there is good reason to believe that the Republicans would have won last November even if they had not had a national hero heading their ticket, and even if discontent over the stalemate in Korea had not played into their hands. For the plain truth is that since shortly after Pearl Harbor, when Roosevelt announced somewhat coyly that "Dr. New Deal" had been supplanted by "Dr. Win-the-War," the Democrats have been living on borrowed time. War saved them in 1944, and in 1948 they would almost surely have gone down if Harry Truman had not been able to cite the "no-good Republican Eightieth Congress" as evidence that the GOP was out to

unravel sixteen years of good works. In 1952 Eisenhower seemed like a safe bet at least to hold on to the New Deal reforms, if not to add to them, and the Democrats themselves were almost wholly on the defensive.

What was worse, they were defending what no longer seemed to need defense. It was challenging to speak out for the bargaining rights of organized labor back in 1936. But it had become a mere gesture by 1952, when those rights were so firmly established that only Westbrook Pegler and his imitators still grumbled at them. In the same way, a federal social security program was hot campaign fare when the Liberty League manned the ramparts for Alf Landon sixteen years ago: but only a feeble slogan last November, when General Eisenhower declared that the social advances of the past two decades were no longer a political issue.

Given the task they had set themselves, and the country's always limited capacity for reform, the New Dealers had perhaps done their work too well for their own political good. Without arguing at this point how much their success owed to war and to the postwar defense program, the fact remains that by 1952 an extremely high percentage of young trade unionists had never known a day's unemployment. Americans had no reason to fear for the safety of their bank deposits. And farmers, however irascible they might be on the subject of federal handouts to others, took government protection of the price structure of their own products for granted. I was told by one liberal Senator that farmers resented his telling their prosperous sons and daughters, during the campaign, of the days when their parents had to be tided over by the WPA. These rugged beneficiaries of the New Deal were a little ashamed of having reached for the helping hand of government, and reminders made them uncomfortable, just as the bankers had long since buried the shameful memory of having once had their skins saved by long-haired professors. If it was not quite true, as one of President Truman's aides put it, that "we ran out of poor peo-

ple," it was certainly true that the supply had dwindled appreciably.

Adlai Stevenson had the good sense to see that it was no longer pertinent to run against Herbert Hoover, and he did manage to discard the weary clichés of Democratic campaigning. But, however refreshing his language, two factors kept him clutched in the tired hand of the past. First, his party felt strongly the need to defend its record. Stevenson had to serve, against his own judgment, in the role described by one of his supporters as "defense counsel of an aging administration." More basic, no one, not even Stevenson, had worked out a fresh and arresting program on which a rousing campaign might have been waged.

To make these points, especially the second, is to explain rather than to criticize. For the probability is that no blueprint pulled out of a hat would have rallied the electorate to the Democratic party. Voters, least of all the pragmatic voters of the United States, do not react to blueprints for the future; they react to programs that seem to them to answer their most pressing immediate needs. Their prime need—and I think this will hardly be gainsaid—was, and is, for some sense of security against the menace of atomic war. They want, above all, the assurance of safety—in peace, if that can be had, or in national strength if it cannot. On this score it is hardly to be wondered that they put their trust in a war hero of a peaceable disposition rather than in a comparatively unknown governor, however undeniable his charm, his ability, and his eloquence. Weighed next to this, it is unlikely that questions of domestic economy counted heavily, if at all.

MUST the Democrats and the liberals, then, wait for the return of international harmony or another depression—or perhaps both—before they can hope to return to power? Fortunately for them politics is never that static. Indeed an enforced period on the outside, free of the deadly pressures of responsibility, could be exactly what is needed for Democratic rejuvenation, for

national recovery from the sheer weariness with reform, and for the opportunity to shape fresh and emerging issues into a significant program. But none of this can be capitalized upon automatically.

What leadership there is in the Democratic party today is in the Senate, and it is almost purely tactical in purpose. To say this is not to ignore the place of Adlai Stevenson but merely to recognize that his leadership, at least for the time, is more symbolic than real. If the party had to pick its next presidential nominee tomorrow, there is little doubt that Stevenson would be the choice, in spite of pointed opposition from conservative Southerners, the continuing ambition of Senator Kefauver, and what are considered the rumblings of emergent ambition on the part of Senator Symington. But a potential Stevenson renomination in 1956 does not imply that he can, or is even trying to, give direction to the party in 1953. Senator Russell of Georgia was not far from the truth when he called Stevenson "titular" head of the party, and defined the adjective as implying "title without authority."

While the right-wing Southerners openly look to Russell and Byrd of Virginia for guidance, as they have for the past ten years, and while the parliamentary reins of the party are formally in the hands of the minority leader in Congress, the only organized planning being done for the Democrats is by a caucus of twenty-three more or less liberal Senators who meet every other week to discuss issues, listen to experts, and plan floor strategy. Headed by Lister Hill of Alabama, its most effective parliamentarian, this unique group is, with some success, trying to fill the role that for twenty years had been held by Democratic presidents. Amounting to half their party's strength in the Senate, it includes, besides Hill, Southerners Sparkman, Fulbright, Gore, Kefauver, and Monroney; Middle Westerners Douglas, Humphrey, Gillette, Symington, and Hennings; Westerners Mansfield, Anderson, Jackson, Hunt, Murray, and Magnuson; and Easterners Lehman, Kennedy, Pastore, Green, Kilgore, and Neely.

It is this caucus that is working out the immediate planning, if not the long-range program, of Democratic liberalism. By and large the planning is such as would suit an enlightened opposition on the alert for tides that might again carry it into power. Issues are selected with an eye to effectiveness and their possibilities for political capital. Remembering Truman's 1948 campaign, the caucus is determined to make a striking record of legislative effort and to show up, by contrast, what they confidently expect will be the negative record of the Republicans. The emphasis, therefore, is always on the positive. It is not enough, for example, to oppose the surrender to the individual states of offshore oil; they must also urge the distribution of income from that oil to the forty-eight states for support of public schools. They are not merely against curtailing public power—some Republicans even talk of turning TVA over to private interests—but plan to sponsor new projects on the TVA model. They are not merely opposed to tax cuts that imperil the efficiency of government and of defense, but seek greater revenue through more equitable taxation.

THE exception to this rule of pressing a positive program, and it is a major exception, occurs in the field of foreign policy. Here the Democrats as a whole are peculiarly negative. Actually their attitude stems from the fact that the Republicans, having offered no program that differs seriously from that of their predecessors, are reduced to fabricating a difference by misrepresenting Democratic policies. Unable, until the Soviet shift that followed Stalin's death, to make any headway in Korea or to take a new tack with respect to the defense of Western Europe, they simply took over the Truman policies while attempting to saddle their opponents with the collapse of Nationalist China and Stalin's betrayal of wartime agreements. Toward this line of attack, the Democrats have taken a vigorous but wholly defensive attitude.

The result has not been imaginative, perhaps, or even constructive, but it has served

to promote a Democratic unity effective enough to thwart an attempted rewriting of history. The same general feeling is likely to come into play if Congressional Republicans try to undo the Truman program indirectly by slashing foreign aid, crippling the reciprocal trade system, or starving the Point Four program.

Members of this liberal caucus readily admit that it is no more than an *ad hoc* grouping. "We don't want to work out an elaborate program on issues," one of them told me, "because they might be no good by 1956." They count, further, on three major sources of help: Republican inertia, Republican blunders, and Republican disunity.

THERE is general agreement, not only in this liberal caucus but everywhere in Washington, that the Republicans are already paying a high price for the foolhardy pledges of their campaign. "They are over-promised," as one Democratic Senator puts it, "on Korea, on fiscal policy, and on farm prices"—all potential dynamite at the polls. Yet this same Senator feels that once the Republicans have settled down and mastered the tricks of governing, they may dig in for a long stretch of power. The Democrats, he points out, were able to cling to office because they had in Roosevelt the combination of a great popular figure and a great political strategist. The Republicans have the popular figure in Eisenhower and the strategist in the team of Thomas E. Dewey and Herbert Brownell.

The Senator went on to say that Dewey-Brownell might arm Eisenhower's administration with the same shrewd technique that has kept the Republicans in control at Albany for the past ten years; namely, a basic conservatism tempered by as much in the way of concession to reform as might be required to keep the opposition slightly but constantly off balance. Thus he expects no open fight by the administration against organized labor, enough support for civil rights legislation to keep the Negroes at least divided, pressure for changes in the Immigration Act to satisfy other minority groups,

and the like. It requires no high degree of cynicism to note that whether these concessions are made out of conviction or expediency, they are directed precisely to those urban areas where the non-Southern Democrats have traditionally found their greatest strength—but where last November they revealed new and surprising weakness.

The probability that this will be the general approach of the new administration naturally influences the tactical plans of the liberal Democrats, and in a way ideally fits into them. For if there is one point on which they are in full agreement, it is that the administration must sooner or later come to open warfare, if not with the gilt-edged Tories led by Taft, then certainly with the wild men in the party for whom McCarthy speaks. Any administration concessions of a liberal hue, on issues foreign or domestic, must speed the day of battle, and indeed on such matters as government reorganization, taxation, wartime agreements with Russia, and the appointment of Ambassador Bohlen, the rumbling has been more than audible. "If [the administration] goes on at this pace," the anti-Eisenhower *Chicago Tribune* complained bitterly after the first two months, "it will not be remembered for any 'hundred days' but will go down as the administration that promoted the lost weekend into a continuous operation."

Naturally enough, a major tactical aim of the Congressional liberals is to exploit such an opening in every possible way. It was no coincidence that the Democrats voted en bloc in committee to strengthen Eisenhower's hand in reorganizing the executive branch, knowing well that the patronage-hungry Republicans had suddenly become cool toward a whittling down of that old devil bureaucracy. Neither is it a secret that by keeping at arm's length from McCarthy, Senate liberals hope not only to avoid unpleasant encounters with him—no doubt a strong consideration in itself—but to speed the day when Eisenhower himself must finally come to grips with that gentleman. Any hostile move by the Democrats, the theory goes, would only rally the Republicans to Mc-

Carthy's side and be interpreted by the public as a partisan attack.

Wherever possible, Democrats are letting the country know that its still popular President has had to draw help from them while his own party is letting him down. Senator Humphrey's "newsletter" to the voters of Minnesota, for example, chattily lets his readers in on a White House luncheon for Democratic Senators at which "we told the President that the way it looked now, he had more support from us than from the Republicans." Of course, "it was all in good humor," he adds—but he doesn't fail to make the point. Neither does Senator Douglas, who says bluntly that if the President's belief in collective security is to be implemented, it will have to be "with the help of Democrats."

TO AMERICAN liberals who for twenty years have identified themselves, intermittently perhaps and with varying degrees of enthusiasm, with the group in power, the leadership I have described must seem minor in key and narrow in purpose. But the most cursory study of the Eisenhower personnel, not to mention the nature of the Republican leadership on Capitol Hill, suggests strongly that this interlude of muted opposition is not destined to last, however circumspect the Dewey-Brownell technique. Old issues are not dead but merely dormant and new ones are a-borning. The preponderance of big business around the President all but assures a revival of the struggle to preserve the public lands for the public, to protect the natural resources of the country, and to keep the anti-monopoly statutes alive and working. All of which, as Senator Monroney suggests, should gradually reawaken enthusiasm for progressive government and take the country past the "fatigue point" which it reached early in the Truman administration.

It is one thing, of course, for Washington tacticians to talk of "fatigue points" and to plan for Republican mistakes, but liberals back home, innocent of the pressures of office, want stronger stuff as a rule. They can

have it—if they make it themselves. And they had better start making it if they expect to have a hand in the resurgence of the Democratic party—or of liberalism itself, for that matter.

What I mean is not the drafting of bold new programs and heady manifestos. It is senseless to talk of political planning on order, and senseless to imagine that in any case such planning will not emerge spontaneously, some of it valuable and some of it dreamy, just as before. Without for a minute belittling the need for long-range, programmatic work—especially on such mounting issues as control of peacetime atomic energy, reform of Congressional investigating procedures, and indeed the whole complex question of economic security and statism—I want to suggest something quite different and probably more trying for those of us who now go by the not too endearing name of "egghead." I mean simply participation—social, political, and cultural—in the day-to-day life of the local community, where the political climate of the nation is generated.

This is hardly an original idea or one offered merely to fill a gap. It is the answer of liberal Congressmen who do not dare to stand up to McCarthy and Company, for example, because they would be voted out of office; because their mail is loaded with approval of the kind of Congressional activity we have been witnessing lately. This applies, by the way, as much to Congressmen from Manhattan as to those from Nevada. It is from the districts, the precincts, and the wards that a shift in the wind must come. "Politics," Senator Humphrey will tell you, "is 99 per cent feeling"—on the part of the voter and, through him, on the part of his representatives. And right now that feeling is not conducive to liberalism, either in civil liberties or foreign affairs.

IT NEED hardly be argued here that no such shift toward liberalism is being stimulated by the press or over the air. The hope, therefore, is that those who feel strongly about such matters will stop talking to themselves

and start talking to their neighbors. They can't talk to them until they know them, as one Senate liberal emphasized in the course of a conversation. And they can't hope to persuade them until they have won their confidence by working with them, in PTA's, in school committees, in welfare drives, and wherever else they can serve the community.

There must be no thought here of infiltrating, much less of seeking organizational power, but merely the aim to know and be known; of letting it gradually sink into the consciousness of the community that intellectuals, "eggheads" if you will, are townspeople no different from their fellows, that liberals are not the devilish caricatures of Senator McCarthy's demonology. Only in this way can the suspicion in which the intellectual has increasingly come to be held be dissipated and the "know-nothings" effectively combated where it counts—on their own home grounds. Only in this way can the liberal who finds himself in a small minority establish his personal credit, get a hearing for his views, and in the long run affect the political climate of the country. For the climate in which the McCarthys and Veldes now bask is real and nationwide, not merely a hot wind on Capitol Hill.

CERTAINLY this is no invitation to liberals to abandon the fields in which they already work or to forego the larger views which give them direction. But a potent effect of this back-to-the-soil movement, politically speaking, would be a long-needed shift of their sights, allowing not only a continued view of national and international horizons, but also a good look at state and local government, on which, like it or not, the political health of the country fundamentally depends. On that level the liberal will discover more than enough to challenge his abilities.

With extremes of statism now plaguing the world, more and more liberals, Stevenson among them, have been leaning away from federalism as an automatic solution of political and social ills; but it would be either foolish or disingenuous to preach decentralization unless something were done to

clean up corrupt and gerrymandered legislatures. There is no point in suggesting that, after all, certain types of social legislation *should* be left to the states if their inadequate and inequitable tax systems are not changed enough to make such legislation feasible. Here is an almost virgin field for active liberals.

To be sure, states' rights talk has in the past almost invariably been a subterfuge, but it need not be. For twenty years shabby politicians have invoked decentralization in the name of Jeffersonian democracy when what they really had in mind was the fact that they could control state and local machinery more readily than national. To this strategy, two alternative responses are possible: to write off state and local mechanisms as hopeless and press for more and more federal controls; or to throw into state and local politics the energy and talent necessary to make it democratic, honest, and efficient.

By and large, liberals have tended to choose the first alternative, and in the emergency of the early 30's, when swift action was needed, that was undoubtedly the practical thing to do. But it is not in the long run either practical or wise to count on injections of democracy from the top. If there was one serious misconception induced by the heady days of the New Deal, it was this notion that the public would indefinitely sanction the bestowal of benefits, however desirable, by an elite, however admirable.

If there is to be a resurgence of liberalism, in the absence of severe economic pressure and in the face of external threat, it will have to be a liberalism that rises from the countryside, the towns, and the suburbs, mounting slowly and solidly through painfully renovated town boards, city councils, and state legislatures. For Pennsylvania Republicans on Capitol Hill the one factor that weighs against national drift and personal inclination is last year's Democratic-liberal *coup* in Philadelphia. Let that pattern begin to show up elsewhere and Congressmen, ever the most sensitive of weathercocks, will be the first to swing with the changing breeze.